

February 5, 2013

Autopsy Decisions in Coroners' Investigations - Statement from the Chief Coroner

The Coroners Service is mandated to determine the identity of the deceased, and the date, location, cause and manner of death for all deaths reported. Deaths that must be reported under the *Coroners Act* include all unnatural and sudden and unexpected deaths. A death due to natural causes of a person under the care of a physician is not considered a reportable death and the Coroners Service does not have legal jurisdiction to investigate these.

Police officers and coroners are routinely called to the scene of sudden and unexpected deaths. Each death is initially treated as suspicious until foul play can be ruled out. Both police and the coroner will undertake a thorough review of the circumstances of the death before determining that there is no evidence of foul play. If foul play is suspected, a criminal investigation by police is launched.

At every scene attended, the coroner will carefully gather information to support identification of the deceased and the time, location, cause and manner of death. The body will either be carefully examined at the scene or later in hospital. Coroners then gather medical and other related history of the deceased from a variety of sources. Autopsy decisions are made in consultation with the regional coroner after carefully and objectively considering all available information. An autopsy will be ordered if cause of death cannot be established through examination of the scene, body and history. Where the preponderance of evidence gathered clearly supports a cause of death, an autopsy will not be undertaken.

Occasionally, to facilitate transferring the remains in a timely manner, an autopsy may be tentatively approved pending discussions with the deceased's personal physician or family to gather more information. Often the information gathered precludes the need for an autopsy and transfer arrangements are then cancelled. This occurs most commonly in those areas of the province where pathology services are only available in major centres.

The Coroners Service will order an autopsy whenever one is necessary to establish the cause of death. While the decision regarding whether or not an autopsy is necessary is discussed with next of kin, the decision is made by the coroner and regional coroner after objectively examining all information available including that provided by the police investigators. Both police and the coroner make decisions based on their knowledge, experience and expertise in the investigation of death and scenes of death. What may appear suspicious to an inexperienced individual or grieving family member is often a not uncommon scene of death to professional, experienced death investigators.

The Coroners Service respects the privacy of the deceased and their family members and will not comment on deaths outside of the jurisdiction of the coroner or on deaths currently under investigation. The public may be assured however, that the Coroners Service exercises care and diligence in carefully reviewing the circumstances of each and every death reported and undertakes all examinations and steps it deems necessary in order to meet its mandate.

Lisa Lapointe
Chief Coroner, Province of British Columbia